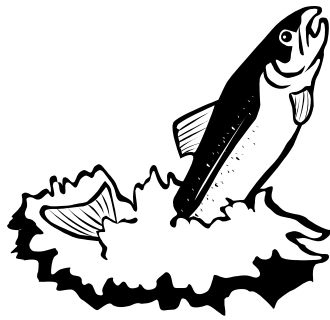


# The Floating World

In the beginning, the world was nothing but a slushy quagmire. The water and the earth were all mixed up and there was nothing but a great swamp. Nothing could live there. But in the six skies above and in the six worlds below dwelled gods, demons, and animals.

In the foggy and hanging skies of the lower heavens, demons lived. In the star-bearing and high skies of the clouds lived the lesser gods. In the skies of the most high lived Kamui, the creator god, and his servants. His realm was surrounded by a mighty metal wall and the only entrance was through a great iron gate.

Kamui made this world as a vast round ocean, resting on the backbone of an enormous trout. This fish sucks in the ocean and spits it out again to make the tides; when it moves it causes earthquakes.



*When the enormous trout spits, it creates the ocean tides.*

One day, Kamui looked down on the watery world and decided to make something of it. He sent down a water wagtail to do the work. When the poor bird arrived and saw what a mess everything was in, it was at its wits' end to know what to do. However, by fluttering over the waters with its wings and by trampling the mud with its feet and beating it with its tail, the wagtail at last created patches of dry land. In this way, islands were raised to float upon the ocean in this, the floating world. Even today, the faithful wagtail is still carrying on its work; it is still beating the ground with its tail.

*This pied wagtail ranges widely over Asia and is popular in Japanese as well as Ainu myths. A wagtail made the Shinto gods, Izanami and Izanagi, fall in love. Wagtail bones and feathers are still used as love charms.*



*The wagtail makes islands by fluttering its wings, trampling with its feet, and beating with its tail.*

When Kamui created the world, the devil tried to thwart him. One morning, the devil got up and lay in wait with his mouth gaping wide to swallow the sun, but Kamui sent a crow to fly down the devil's throat and make him choke and cough. That is why the crow is such a bold bird. Because a crow once saved the world, all crows think they can act as they like, even stealing people's food.

When the animals living up in the heavens saw how beautiful the world was, they begged Kamui to let them go and live on it, and he did. But Kamui also made many other creatures especially for the world. The first people, the Ainu, had bodies of earth, hair of chickweed, and spines made from sticks of willow. That is why when we grow old, our backs become bent.

Kamui sent Aioina, the divine man, down from heaven to teach the Ainu how to hunt and cook. When Aioina returned to heaven after living among people and teaching them many things, the gods all held their noses, crying, "What a terrible smell of human being there is!"

They sniffed and sniffed to find out where the stink was coming from. At last, they traced the smell to Aioina's clothes. The gods sent him back to earth and refused to let him back into heaven until he left all his clothes behind. Down in the floating world, Aioina's cast-off sandals turned into the first squirrels.



*Aioina's old sandals turn into the world's first squirrels.*



*Island People:*

*The Shiretoko peninsula is a long finger of land that reaches out into the sea of Okhotsk from a "floating world" – the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. The island is still home to the people who tell this story, the Ainu, Japan's first inhabitants,*